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ABSTRACT

Educators need to find ways to help parents to reexamine their attitudes and practices in child rearing. Such help must first overcome obstacles to attitudinal growth. Obstacles include the possible wholesale acceptance of their own parents' methods, or, conversely, their wholesale rejection due to parents' efforts to be different. Another obstacle is the typical adult resistance to learning and change. Preschool personnel are in a strategic position to help parents in the examination of their present practices, so that they can arrive at new interaction patterns better suited to the development of their children and to the promotion of harmonious family life. Parents can be enabled to change if, first, they feel full acceptance, respect, and support from educators. Second, they should be encouraged to become involved in school activities and to join a parent discussion group. Within the framework provided by accepting professionals and supportive fellow parents it will become possible to accept the challenge to some current practices. Challenge and support can enable parents to take action, i.e. to try different ways and methods of handling children. Professionals and fellow parents can then discuss, encourage, and support such attempts. As a last step the professional should help parents to conceptualize their new insights by providing feedback. (Author)

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Parent Attitude Change Through Involvement: An Examination of the Dynamics than can Facilitate Parent Growth in Preschool Settings.

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Recent years have seen a tremendous movement toward family based programs connected with early childhood education.

These programs can be roughly divided into two groups. (1) those that train parents, often with emphasis on stimulating the child's cognitive or academic development (Levenstein at al, 1970; Walberg, 1984) and (2) those that attempt to improve self-image, comepetence, and parenting skills of parents.

Lillian Katz cautions us about expecting parents to act as instructors. She distinguishes between parent roles and those of teachers in scope, intensity, spntaneity, and scope of responsibility. She warns that making parents into pseudo-teachers will divert their attention from their goals of helping children with more complex aspects of their development, i.e. self reliance, moral development, social skills, and motivation (Katz, 1980).

Programs focusing on parents qua parents are of a great variety. In the United States there has been an upsurge of community-based family oriented programs that included a change of focus in the federally funded Headstart Program. These programs vary greatly depending on the socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds of the parents and on the philosophy of the parent educators. Programs that offer a variety of services were found to be most effective with low-income parents (Powell, 1986). Some parents of less stressful backgrounds participated in group programs that were clearly structured, such as the behavior modification

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programs (Becker, 1971) and the Parent Effectiveness Training developed by Thomas Gordon (Gordon, 1970).

Other group training programs were less structured, deriving their focus from the initiative of the participants.

The informal model rather than trying to " improve " parents where weaknesses are perceived, aims at using and furthering the healthy part of the parent's personality. It builds on strength. It is based on the assumption that mutual support by group members will be most effective in raising parents' self confidence. It will allow them to reexamine and, if they so decide, to change their attitudes, expectations, and child rearing practices (Auerbach, 1968).

In the following I would like to sketch a conceptual model of informal parent education based on hypothetical assumptions about the ways in which learning takes place, especially in adults.

Learning for children is a natural growth process. As we have learned from Piaget, outside experiences and inner maturation interact and produce accomodation and assimilation.

For adults the process is much more painful. Usually, in order to learn something new the adult must discard something old. This is a painful process, meeting resistance even in the best of circumstances.

Nevertheless, we know that adults are able to learn and to change. We have only to compare a parent's attitudes, expectations, and behavior with a first-born to their more knowledgeable handling of subsequent children.

I would like to hypothethize that parental attitude change can be facilitated by the following sequence:

a. Involvement

b. Support

c. Challenge

d. Action

e. Feedback

Parent involvement is often the major focus of parent aducation or parent support programs (Walberg 1094). The federally funded Headstart program has evolved from a program focused on the child to various models that view the parent and the family as primary clients. (Powell, 1982,1986; Zigler and Berman, 1983). In all these programs the basic assumption is that involvement will lead to family growth and development.

In early childhood centers involvement is easy to facilitate. Parents of young children are usually only too eager to be close to their young child, when cicumstances permit. If the child's teacher and director can convey to parents a willingness to profit from their expertise about their own child and an acceptance of the parents themselves, then the social distance between professional and parent will diminish.

Parent involvement in the school can take many forms. A good example of parent involvement is the 1985 OMEP project in Andalusia (Spain) that involved parents in classrooms of 3- and 4-year olds. Traditio children in these classes were forced to sit for long periods of time practicing writing skills, drilling number facts, and learning to read.

The project brought parents into these classrooms as trained paraprofessionals, as sporadic participants, or as members of the parent and community associations. Parents assisted in the classrooms, made materials, and took an active role in observing and evaluating children's

growth and in planning curriculum. The results were surprising : According to Margaret Weiser (1985):

" * Participation of parents in the design of the curriculum benefited both preschoolers and their families.

* Involvement and participation of parents in the center enriched all parts of the program.

* Involvement and participation of the parents resulted in an attitude change on the part of the professionals causing them to move from traditional curriculum to one that involved the children in community and the community in the lives of the children. Significant social, psychological, and intellectual benefits have been noted. In addition, those adults who had most serious reservations became active proponents of the program."

The major aim of parent involvement in the preschool is to reduce social distance and to overcome the defensiveness that both teachers and parents feel so often. Once such involvement and mutual respect in established parent-teacher communication will become easier and parents will often be ready to trust the school and to accept support.

Preschools can offer <u>support</u> in many ways. The traditional parent-teacher conference, often dreaded by both parties can become a supportive interchange between two adults concerned about the same child.

If parents have to seek outside help for their child, school personnel can offer their support until the parent becomes able to trust the child's therapist of other professionals.

In situations where parent discussion groups are available the teacher

or director can offer the support parents need to enter this new mode of communication with one's peers.

Informal parent discussion groups fulfill the conditions we stipulated at the outset: to build their agenda on the concerns of parents and to succeed because they tap whatever inner strength the parent has. There are many kinds of parent groups - apart from the structured ones we mentioned earlier. Parents often meet in informal " rap sessions " in community centers, in libraries, or in each other's homes. Any group meeting on a regular basis can become a support network.

More formally organized groups retain the services of a professional leader. Since I had the fascinating job of being such a leader many times, I can discuss some of the dynamics of such a group based on my own experience.

There is the phenomenon of " jelling ", usually at about the third session, when the group truly becomes a functioning entity. At this point acceptance and support of the individual passes to the group.

The role of the leader is to move the discussion forward by questioning, summarizing, clarifying, generalizing. The leader should shield individuals when necessary and prevent individual embarassment. The leader can provide information and give a point of view, but as a group member not as an " authority ".

Since discussion usually revolves around experiences many members share, parents find it easy to identify with group members. Moreover, since they regard many of those experiences as uniquely their own, the realization that others face similar problems will reduce guilt, anger, and a sense of incompetence or failure.

As experiences are shared, parents have the opportunity of seeing their experiences " from the outside " , as it were. This enables them to re-examine their attitudes and expectations. It allows them to imagine ways of responding to their children that differ from their previous practices without feeling defensive.

This is the experience that facilitates attitude change.

The group's encouragement and implicit challenge can allow a revision of previous attitudes and expectations and precipitates heretofore unimagined action.

In most educational situations challenge has to be artificially provided to shake people out of their complacency. The most common response to such challenge is a rise in anxiety level, which can be so threatening that the individual may use defense - denial, verbalization, aggression, flight - to escape it.

In an informal discussion group the challenge becomes tolerable because it is coupled with the group's support. It is as if group members said in effect " go ahead, try it, we think you can do it ! "

This is the point of incitement to action. Parents have experienced other modes of interaction with their children either vicariously through other parents or in their imagination.

Now with the support of fellow parents they are ready to put these ideas into practice.

The group leader often has to protect parents from too sanguine expectation at this point. Miracles don't happen overnight.

No parent in a group should be faced with a single, no alternative possible, way of acting. There are many ways and many of them are right. Parents are encouraged not to " improve " but to experiment. This allows individuals to develop their own idiosyncratic style.

As parents return to the group and report incidents based on understandings and insights newly acquired, family happenings that they handled in innovative ways, they are often not even aware that they have changed.

This is the point where the leader or group members can provide the feedback that makes the individual aware of his or her growth and thereby gives the new learning a better chance of permanence.

Summary

It has become evident that we serve children best by focusing on their parents as well.

Parents have become involved in their child's education in many ways. In order to achieve optimum results it is desirable to go further. If parents' anxieties are reduced by support from professionals, or, in the case of discussion groups, by group members, they will be able to accept the challenge that will bring about attitude change and more desirable parenting practices.

Finally, let me cite Lillian Katz' (1977) " Principle of Congruity " - that adults must be treated according to the same principles that they should apply to children. Thus, if we want parents to treat children with respect, we must accord them the respect they deserve, allowing them to learn and grow, rather than talking down to them.

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PARENT ATTITUDE CHANGE THROUGH INVOLVEMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DYNAMICS THAT CAN FACILITATE PARENT GROWTH IN PRESCHOOL SETTINGS. Elisabeth S.Hirsch, Ph.D., The City College,City University of New York, New York, N.Y., U.S.A. Educators need to find ways to help parents to reexamine their attitudes and practices in child rearing. Such help must first overcome obstacles to attitudinal growth. Obstacles include the possible wholesale acceptance of their own parents' methods, or, conversely, their wholesale rejection due to parents' efforts to be different. Another obstacle is the typical adult resistance to learning and change. Preschoolpersonnel are in a strategic position to help parents in the examination of their present practices, so that they can arrive at new interaction patterns better suited to the development of their children and to the promotion of harmonious family life. Parents can be enabled to change if, first, they feel full acceptance, respect, and support from educators. Second, they should be encouraged to become involved in school activities and to join a parent discussion group. Within the framework provided by accepting professionals and supportive fellow parents it will become possible to accept the challenge to some current practices. Challenge and support can enable parents to take action, i.e. to try different ways and methods of handling children. Professionals and fellow parents can then discuss, encourage, and support such attempts. As a last step the professional should help parents to conceptualize their new insights by providing feedback.